

The Moral Libertarian: A Moral Case for Liberty and Liberalism

Taken from The Moral Libertarian Horizon, Volume 1

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In recent years, it has become fashionable to look down upon liberalism. It started on the right a few decades ago. American conservatives quite successfully painted American liberals as people who are elitist, out of touch, and spend tax dollars 'liberally' just because they want to. Now this disease has spread to the left. While American conservatives still use the l-word to describe everyone to their left, resulting in ridiculous phrases like 'Bernie Sanders is very liberal' (when he won't even support free trade), a new generation of leftists have identified themselves as socialists and pit their identity against those people they call liberal, as in Bernie is a socialist, Hillary is a liberal. While the attacks on liberalism come from different angles, they share some common themes: liberals are out of touch elitists, supporters of the privileged establishment, enemy of the common good, technocrats who think they know what's best for everyone, and so on. A very sad description indeed, especially for the ideology of Locke, Mill and Burke, the ideology of both Keynes and Hayek, the ideology of such great leaders as Prime Minister Lloyd George and President Franklin Roosevelt, and the ideology of most early feminists.

Liberalism's Fall From Grace

So how did liberalism fall so far from grace? I believe the answer lies in idealism, or rather, the lack thereof. As liberalism came from the margins into the mainstream of political thought, it took on the reins of government more and more frequently. By the mid 20th century, liberalism became identified with governments, who was inevitably made up mostly by elite and establishment figures, and whose day-to-day job was mostly concerned with making practical decisions, often on the advice of technocratic 'experts'. In other words, what was once conservatism's weakness became liberalism's weakness. We can actually see that at the same time, in the former Soviet bloc, these establishment characteristics became lumped in with socialism. We can also see that, as western conservatives started losing their grip on the establishment, they started finding their idealistic voice again, and began to attack liberals as the new 'establishment'. Looking at the bigger picture, we can see that liberalism caught the disease of the establishment in the mid 20th century, and never quite recovered. Being in the establishment makes a movement lose sight of its ideals, and this insight may still fail to recover even if the establishment position is lost.

I think it is safe to say that liberalism is no longer the establishment, right now, to put it very mildly. As of this writing (2018), liberalism only accounts for a minority of world leaders. US president Donald Trump is surely not liberal. In fact, both conservatism and socialism are arguably stronger than liberalism at this point in history. Why? Because they have an ideal, they have a narrative. Right now, libertarianism is the only branch of the liberal tree to have anything close to a strong narrative built on strong principles. And even much of libertarianism isn't based on a moral worldview like conservatism or socialism. The moral consequences of consistently applying the Non-Aggression Principle (NAP) remains a controversial thing for many people, and libertarians have often argued

their case on economic efficiency and lower taxes to avoid this controversy. I'm not making this up: some libertarians have argued that their ideology will allow people to truly follow their moral compass without collective coercion from society, while others have argued that with all property being private property, socially deviant behaviour will be effectively suppressed by the property owners acting out of their self interest. Which simply looks like, the consequences of a libertarian government will be what I want it to be. As for the form of liberalism that comes with a welfare state, it looks even worse. If welfare state liberalism is all about equality and wealth redistribution, wouldn't it be even more principled to go straight for socialism and oppose all free market capitalism outright? (Which is, not coincidentally, what many young people are doing.) For many people, liberalism simply doesn't look like a morality sound and principled way of looking at politics.

Liberalism as a Moral Worldview: The Principle of Equal Moral Agency

But is liberalism morally sound? To answer this question, we need to look at what liberalism is. Liberalism is the ideology that is primarily concerned with liberty, above all else. Socialism is more concerned with economic equality than liberty, conservatism is more concerned with maintaining tradition than liberty, and nationalism is more concerned with the future of the nation than individual liberty. Putting liberty first is the defining feature of liberalism, therefore. However, this cannot be liberalism's only feature, for liberty is also found in various forms in other ideologies. For example, in traditional feudal societies with absolute monarchies, the King had almost unlimited liberty. The lords also had an amount of liberty much greater than any citizen in a modern liberal democracy: for example, they had the 'liberty' to own and trade slaves. The unique thing about liberalism is that it aims to distribute as equally as possible the liberty of each person in society. Therefore, while nobody can have the liberties of kings and nobles past, everyone can have their fair share of liberty. While liberals disagree on how liberty can be distributed most equally, with some arguing for NAP-based libertarianism and others arguing for a strong welfare state, this often unspoken shared principle is what we have in common.

How does liberalism's dedication to distributing liberty equally make it a moral ideology? To answer this question, we need to first look at what liberty is. Liberty is the power an individual has over their own actions, their ability to put their ideas into action. Therefore, looking at it from a moral perspective, liberty is moral agency, i.e. the ability to act in accordance with one's moral compass. An equitable distribution of liberty therefore ensures an equitable distribution of moral agency. In this way, liberalism ensures that every individual in society has an equal share of moral agency. At this point, we need to turn to the fact that liberty (and hence moral agency) are also finite resources: if some have more, others must have less. If lords can command slaves (therefore having more liberty), slaves will not be able to act according to their own moral compass, and thus have no moral agency. Therefore, in an equal distribution of liberty (and hence moral agency), everyone can have full moral agency over their own beliefs and actions, but nobody can have moral agency over another. This, I would argue, makes liberalism the ONLY morally valid ideology. Since all human beings are morally flawed to some extent, allowing some humans to have moral agency over others is morally impermissible. Allowing a lord to command a slave as he pleases means that the slave must commit an immoral act even if the act is both objectively immoral (as in absolute truth) and known to be immoral by the slave, as long as the act is not known to be immoral by the lord (or alternatively he is a depraved lord and does not care). This has several consequences. On an

individual level, the slave would be morally responsible (at least in his conscience, and also by the laws of religion for those of us who are religious) for committing a moral wrong, knowing that it is wrong, but not being able to resist anyway. On a societal level, it also means that those holding power can commit severe atrocities, without the moral consciences of other people acting as a brake. Which was actually how tragedies like the holocaust happened. One may be tempted to argue that, as long as we prevent having bad governments by being vigilant voters and by putting in place national and international regulations, nothing as bad will happen again. But this is naive, because the ability to judge if governments are good is limited by the fact that politicians often lie their way into power and manipulate the political landscape once in office. It is also still true that no human being can perfectly know the absolute truth of what is morally right or wrong, and therefore, if we simply let those in power decide for everyone, there will still be plenty of injustices, even if nowhere as great as the holocaust. The principle of Equal Moral Agency is the only thing that will prevent such injustices.

Liberalism's Individualism is Required by its Morality

The other thing about liberalism is that it is an individualistic ideology, i.e. it looks at individuals rather than groups of people or society as a whole. Socialism cares about the equality of social classes, and nationalism cares about the nation state as a whole, with both ideologies refusing to look at people on an individual level. In contrast, liberalism, insists that the equal distribution of liberty is to be implemented on an individual-by-individual basis. It is not good enough if, say, overall the people of Australia have the same amount of liberty as the people of Britain, if some people in both countries don't get their fair share of liberty. It is also not good enough if, say, overall working class women have the same amount of liberty as middle class men, if some people in both socio-economic groups don't get their fair share of liberty. The liberal aversion to some forms of affirmative action comes from this principle. For example, no liberal should support the 'progressive stack' speaking system used at some Occupy rallies. Furthermore, unlike in many other ideologies, the same rules apply to governments, because they are also ultimately made up of individuals. Therefore, the government cannot have more liberty to make moral decisions than individual citizens, even if the government is democratically elected, and even if they claim to make the decisions on behalf of oppressed minorities. For example, the government cannot coerce anyone to accept a definition of marriage they don't agree with, even if it had a majority mandate to do so, and this applies for all possible definitions of marriage. This is why liberals equally uphold marriage equality (like the left) and religious freedom about marriage (like the right). Another example is that liberals should support the right of parents to withdraw their children from absolutely any class they don't agree with, in public schools. Many of the aforementioned political positions have caused rifts between liberals and leftists in recent years. But we liberals must stand our ground firmly, if we are to be true to our moral worldview.

While both liberals and leftists are historically considered together under the progressive umbrella, liberalism's insistence on individual rights at every turn has always sat uncomfortably with the Left's wish for collective action on almost everything. The Left believes that collective, and often coercive, action can bring about progress much more efficiently. But this collective, coercive action is clearly in violation of the principle of Equal Moral Agency: those setting the agenda for the collective movement decide the course of action, and others have to follow for fear of ostracization or worse.

In recent years, the Left's disregard for individuals' rights to have a fair share of moral agency has worryingly accelerated, as free speech has been replaced by safe speech (i.e. speech that is deemed politically correct by movement leaders), and measures like the so-called progressive stack, which clearly violate the equal right of every individual's voice to be considered, are popularized. Of course, while the Left claims to want more female, ethnic and LGBT voices to be heard, the moment one of these voices promotes an idea the leaders find 'regressive', it is shut down. As a result of this new straitjacket on leftist thinking, conformity within leftist ranks has accelerated, with those who are pro-life or have certain foreign policy views increasingly finding themselves spat on by the movements they once considered their political homes. Meanwhile, the lack of a free speech culture means that feminist and LGBT movements are whitewashed to look like a homogenous whole without much dissent on key issues. The Left is clearly embarking on a misguided path.

Meanwhile, liberalism's emphasis on individual liberty and moral conscience provides a much better way forward for social justice. Liberalism encourages everyone to make their case in the free market of ideas. The morality or lack thereof of each idea can be debated freely, and with individuals having the moral agency to put their ideas into practice, time will also tell what fruit their ideas will bear. In this way, the free market effectively decides the best, most moral and most fruitful, ideas that will survive into the future. John Stuart Mill called this the cauldron of ideas, with new ideas being added into the cauldron constantly and good ones living on, but I prefer the free market metaphor because it is, to some extent, a competitive process. A brand new idea, like a brand new product in the marketplace, is usually nowhere near perfect. The process of having to compete with competitors leads to modification and innovation, and even in some cases imitation, to make for a more competitive product. In the same way, ideas can be refined, and the morality of individuals and hence the society they live in can improve with time, just like how the quality of consumer goods improve with time. Also, in this free market of ideas, there is no need to subjectively judge whether ideas are progressive or regressive. If an idea is truly regressive, i.e. worse than what is already on offer, people will not 'buy it', much like how nobody can hope to make a profit off a business selling twenty-year-old computers. If an idea is truly regressive, it will not survive the free market of ideas. On the other hand, if an idea can thrive in the free market of ideas, then it cannot be regressive in an objective sense.

The Moral Libertarian Creed

Of course, what I have outlined above is only one reason to support liberalism. Both historically and in the present, there have been plenty of other reasons for liberal politics. Mill's liberalism, for example, was strongly associated with his utilitarianism, while my liberalism clearly has nothing to do with utilitarianism. Therefore, we need a specific term to describe the supporters of liberal politics who approach it from a moralistic angle, or more specifically, those who are committed to the principle of Equal Moral Agency as their creed. I propose that we identify as Moral Libertarians. Like civil libertarians being concerned primarily with civil liberties, we are primarily concerned with moral liberty. And just like civil libertarianism, moral libertarianism does not have a fixed economic program. Civil libertarians can be anything from monarchists to socialists, depending on their other beliefs. Likewise, moral libertarians can take a variety of economic positions, depending on their views of what moral liberty should entail and how it can be equitably distributed, informed by their own conscience. Thus moral libertarianism forms a new branch of the liberal tree, overlapping

somewhat with libertarianism, classical liberalism, civil libertarianism and welfare liberalism in different ways.